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3. “But I ain’t soft” – Enqueering *Moonlight*’s (2016) Intersectional Renegotiation of Black Masculinity

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Abstract

The chapter will examine the nuanced portrayal of Black masculinity in the critically acclaimed coming-of-age drama *Moonlight* (2016), written and directed by Barry Jenkins. The intersection of Blackness and queerness has largely been ignored or even stigmatized in past cultural representation of Black masculinity. *Moonlight*, however, invites scrutiny of the impact that questions of identity, masculinity, and sexuality can have on the portrayal of Black masculinity. As the title of the movie, adapted from the play by Tarell Alvin McCraney *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, suggests and the movie repeatedly alludes to, Black boys and men are expected to keep up an overly ‘masculine’ persona. This façade can only be dropped when the soft light of the moon turns them blue. These blue moments of emotionality, intimacy, and vulnerability occur repeatedly in Jenkins’S film, allowing other facets of masculinity to shine through. The chapter shows how, within these scenes, which intertwine themes of Black male identity formation in conjunction with intimate relationships between men, distinct spaces emerge. In these spaces, individuals find the freedom to express emotions, embrace vulnerability, and exhibit affectionate and nurturing behavior. These inter-male relationships or moments of closeness are interpreted in this chapter as a form of queering in the film. Queering, on the one hand, because same-sex closeness has no legitimacy in typical constructions of Black masculinity or is even dismissed. But, queering also applies to the sexual identity of Chiron, the movie’s protagonist, as conveyed in some of the analyzed scenes. Ultimately, my enqueery of *Moonlight* shows that the movie provides room for a more multifaceted and less confining representation of Black masculinity. It counters narratives of aggression, dominance; and violence often attributed to Black male characters in the past US media landscape.

Keywords

Black masculinity, Film studies, intersectionality, queerness

Introduction

"Black men loving black men is the revolutionary act."

Director, producer, and writer Marlon Riggs included the preceding quote in his groundbreaking documentary *Tongues Untied* (1989). It was one of the first documentary films that represented Black gay men in the US cultural landscape. During the 1980s and 1990s, Riggs's unembellished portrayal of the homophobia and racism faced by Black men contrasted with the limited and often marginalized representations in mainstream media. The intersection of Blackness and queerness was largely ignored or stigmatized, as the dominant view of Black masculinity was tied to an assertive form of heterosexuality. Amid the fear of the AIDS crisis and the rigid stereotypes surrounding Black masculinity at the time, Black queer men unapologetically loving and living – as Riggs's work and words suggest – epitomized a daring revolution.

Since Riggs's contributions, the representation of Black masculinity has remained largely unchanged, highlighting the ongoing need for more expansive portrayals. Thus, it was hardly surprising that the release of *Moonlight* (2016), a coming-of-age drama chronicling the life of a Black gay man, attracted significant attention. The movie received 161 accolades, including the Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Adapted Screenplay. It also made history as the first all-black cast movie and the first LGBTQIA+ movie to win Best Picture. *Moonlight*, written and directed by Berry Jenkins, negotiates topics such as identity, masculinity, and sexuality anew, challenging existing scripts of Black masculinity. The title, taken from Tarell Alvin McCraney's as yet unpublished play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, reflects the shedding of the overly 'masculine' persona that Black men are often expected to maintain – a hard façade that can only soften under the gentle, revealing light of the moon. In Jenkins' film, the main character Chiron takes these symbolic moon baths, as he repeatedly experiences moments of emotionality, intimacy, and vulnerability which allow for other facets of his masculinity to shine through.

I argue that *Moonlight* unveils alternatives to preconceived and harmful notions of Black masculinity when moments of queer intimacy intersect with Chiron's negotiation of his identity as a Black man. The film renegotiates Black masculinity not only by portraying Chiron's struggles with his queer sexuality. It also and most importantly offers alternative drafts of Black masculinity that include vulnerability, emotionality, and intimacy within intermale relationships. This chapter's 'enqueery' of *Moonlight* will provide answers to the following research questions: how are issues related to Black masculinity – such as hypermasculinity, hypersexualization, and stoicism – renegotiated or even queered in *Moonlight*? How do the intersections of race, sexuality, and gender contribute to the renegotiation of Black masculinity in the film? Before transitioning to a close reading of the movie, a theoretical

framework on intersectionality, Black masculinity, and queerness/queering will clarify the chapter's underlying theory.

Intersectionality

This section begins by clarifying the concept of intersectionality, laying the groundwork for understanding how *Moonlight* navigates overlapping structures of identity and oppression. Intersectionality originated as an idea within the Black feminist movement before it was established as an analytical framework by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw introduced intersectionality as an academic approach to examining how racism and sexism intersected in the discrimination of Black women in the US labour market. Scholars from various disciplines have since expanded intersectionality into a theory, approach, and concept to explain, analyze, and tackle multi-axis discrimination based on various social categorizations such as gender, sexuality, race, class, age, and disability (Crenshaw, "Margins" 1241-48; Collins and Bilge 1-2). Collins and Bilge, for instance, acknowledge in their definition of intersectionality that social and political phenomena, as well as individual identities, are never only shaped by one sole factor but by the convergence of multiple axes of social division (Collins and Bilge 2). To that effect, they argue that "intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves" (2). Thus, intersectionality enhances an understanding of the interrelation and interplay of social identity markers in shaping compound individual identities. Moreover, it makes resulting specificities of discrimination that individuals with compound identities face more intelligible. It allows for a more exhaustive analysis that moves beyond simplistic and isolated perspectives on oppression.

An example is Kimberlé Crenshaw's aforementioned detailed examination of the challenges faced by Black women in the US labor market. Crenshaw argues that conventional approaches to combating racial discrimination fail to address the specific experiences of Black women because their gender is not taken into account (Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing" 140). Through examining their specific stereotyping as well as their limited job opportunities and job advancement, Crenshaw sheds light on the inequalities Black women face. She highlights discriminatory practices such as denied maternity leave and unequal pay that disproportionately affect Black women compared to White women and Black men.

In the context of this chapter, intersectionality serves to analyze the representation of intersectionally compound identities in cultural production, more specifically in film. Intersectional media studies examines how media representations can either reinforce or challenge harmful narratives and power structures. It provides insights into how different marginalized groups are portrayed, and the ways in which intersectional identities are either marginalized and/or celebrated. Campbell and Carilli highlight in this regard that "when talking about media representation, for example,

power relations must be examined not only in terms of identity but in terms of media hegemony" (3). Joseph and Winfield expand on this, stating that intersectionality as a "toolkit not only includes space to expand what controlling images can be but also [includes space] to construct a new lens for more representative analysis" (410). Following this idea, this chapter uncovers the ways in which film, here *Moonlight*, both perpetuates and challenges social inequalities and stereotypes concerning Black masculinity.

Within academic discussions, there is ongoing debate about whether the discrimination faced by Black men is intersectional. This debate arises because, despite facing racial discrimination, Black men hold certain privileges within patriarchal structures, leading scholars to question whether their discrimination is primarily due to race rather than the intersection of race and gender. However, I disagree with this argument. While both Black and White men are positioned within patriarchal structures, Black men's experiences are simultaneously shaped by racism under White hegemony, which produces distinct gendered realities for them. bell hooks explains in her book *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* that while White men benefit from patriarchal privileges, Black men face unique challenges and forms of oppression that intersect with race. She highlights how the intersection of race and gender results in the marginalization and devaluation of Black masculinity, with Black men being subjected to racial profiling, criminalization, and violence (hooks 56-62). Relating thereto, bell hooks states: "At the center of the way black male selfhood is constructed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is the image of the brute—untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling"(x).

Black Masculinity

The racially informed expectations and stereotypes Black men face in the US have arisen from a long history of slavery, white supremacy, racism, and oppression. hooks suggests that, unlike African explorers 'pre-Columbus,' who did not seek dominance over indigenous peoples in the US and thus did not exhibit a masculinity tied to dominance, African enslaved men were later taught patriarchal masculinity by White oppressors (1-3). Meanwhile, the commodification of Black bodies during slavery, where Black individuals were objectified and reduced to mere property, played a significant role in shaping the perceptions of Black masculinity. These dehumanizing experiences of Black enslaved men contributed to the emergence of dominant cultural narratives that associated Black men with attributes such as hardness, strength, and stoicism. To this effect, Collins states: "Historically, African American men were depicted primarily as bodies ruled by brute strength and natural instincts, characteristics that allegedly fostered deviant behaviors of promiscuity and violence" (152).

Consequently, these enduring images have deeply influenced the construction of Black masculinity in history and contemporary society. As Collins points out: "Historical representations of Black men as beasts have spawned a second set of images that center on Black male bodies, namely, Black men as inherently violent, hyperheterosexual, and in need of discipline" (158). Thus, many of these portrayals are constructed as controlling images that serve to minimize Black men and Blackness while promoting racial oppression (166). Black men are expected to conform to White patriarchal masculinity but are still othered by racist constructions imposed on their bodies. Slatton and Spates argue as follows:

> Manhood in the United States is fundamentally constructed around perceptions of whiteness and heterosexuality. The disproportionate failure of non-white men to live up to the standard of "true manhood" reinforces the process of "othering." Contemporary notions of manhood include heterosexual white males as financial providers and protectors; while black masculinity has become closely associated with perceptions of dangerousness, unreliability, criminality, and an inability to serve in supportive or protective capacities. (3)

Ultimately, cultural representations of Black masculinity today often emphasize hypermasculine traits such as physical strength, aggression, and sexual prowess (Collins 151). Cultural theorist Stuart Hall posits that cultural representations act as powerful discourses that shape self-perception and external perception (15-16). Candy Ratliff's retrospective self-perception as a Black man in his text "Growing Up Male: A Re-Examination of African American Male Socialization" reflects these ideas when he states: "This is why there was always an emphasis on making sure that I was tough ... that I was not a punk ... that I was not soft ... and most importantly, that I would not become a sissy. Succinctly, it was conveyed to me directly and indirectly that I would develop into a *real* man" (10).

Furthermore, Ratliff emphasizes: "Within this socially constructed conceptualization of masculinity, as understood then by an adolescent, one exhibited their manliness through physical dominance over women, the denouncement of anti-male behavior and by the number of women one could bed" (12-13). Ratliff's upbringing exemplifies that there is a strong emphasis on cultivating toughness and avoiding perceived signs of weakness, such as being *soft* or *feminine*, to conform to societal notions of Black masculinity. Masculinity is associated with physical dominance and control. Deviating from this socially constructed ideal of masculinity, for instance through engaging in same-sex relationships, is stigmatized and perceived as undermining one's manhood bestowing dishonor upon the respective person.

Black Masculinity in Film So Far

Building on the Hall-sian connection between cultural discourses and identity formation, it is fruitful to examine how Black masculinity has been represented in film so far. Katharine Bausch, for instance, traced the historical development of Black

masculinity in film, highlighting the shift from the exaggerated portrayals of hypermasculine Black heroes during the Blaxploitation cinema era in the 1970s to the emergence of New Black Realism in contemporary films. She argues that Blaxploitation films, described as the "vanguard of Black filmmaking" (273), initially empowered Black characters by challenging stereotypes and asserting a new form of Black masculinity. However, the Blaxploitation genre later succumbed to commodification and sensationalism, ultimately reinforcing negative stereotypes and perpetuating limited representations of Black masculinity (263-66). The idea that Black masculinity and Black male assertiveness against White supremacy was grounded in sexual autonomy emerged from the Black Power movement of the time. It was quickly adopted in popular film and eventually contributed to a harmful hypersexualization of Black men. Later on, the emergence of New Black Realism in the 1990s offered a shift towards more nuanced portrayals. However, these films still grappled with complexities and often depicted African-American women in detrimental roles, drawing critiques for reinforcing stereotypes. Movies mostly centered around young Black men in urban settings entangled in chaotic and nihilistic lives characterized by violence and drugs, while attempting to humanize them amidst prevailing stereotypes (267). New Black Realist films continued to explore themes of sex and sexuality, borrowing from Blaxploitation cinema's portrayal of Black men's sexual identity. At the same time, they emphasized personal responsibility, challenged the idea of sex as the sole determinant of manhood, and addressed societal issues such as promiscuity and the impact of AIDS on the Black community (268-70).

By contrast, contemporary representations of Black masculinity frequently take place within the genre of action cinema. Yvonne Tasker emphasizes that these representations of Black masculinity differ from earlier portrayals. Whereas earlier genres such as westerns and war films celebrated and centered on White masculinity, the emergence of action cinema has provided opportunities for more diverse representations (Tasker 116-18). African-American, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian performers have been able to take on central action roles. Tasker points to the fact that "the extent to which male (and to a lesser extent female) stars of color perform such conventional heroism is by no means insignificant" (119). Having said that, it is crucial to acknowledge that action cinema oftentimes builds its narrative on a certain physicality and strength of its heroes. Such depicitions may further perpetuate the damaging stereotype of Black individuals as hypermasculine, aggressive, and solely defined by their assertiveness. These portrayals often ignore the diversity and complexity of Black men's experiences, focusing narrowly on physical traits while neglecting intellectual and emotional dimensions.

Queerness and Queering

"Queer is very much a category in the process of formation" (1), as Annamaria Jagose states in an introduction to queer theory. As a term that often tries to defy conceptualization in fixed categories, it is thus hard to pinpoint a straight and delimited meaning of the term. When used as a descriptor of sexual and gender identities, 'queer' encompasses the entire spectrum that deviates from heterosexual and cisgender norms. It serves as an umbrella term that includes individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or with other non-normative sexual orientations and gender expressions. The use of the term acknowledges the complexity and fluidity of sexuality and gender, challenging binary categorizations and recognizing that identities may not neatly fit into traditional dichotomies.

When 'queer' is used in an academic context, it is most commonly used in debates on queer theory. This interdisciplinary field emerged parallel to the consolidation of lesbian and gay studies during the 1990s. Since then, it has sought to challenge stable notions of sex, gender, and sexual desire. Scholars in the field analyze and question the construction of binaries in society and explore the complexity and fluidity of human experiences (Henderson 3-4). Influential scholars such as Teresa de Laurentis, who coined the term queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Judith Butler played a significant role in shaping the academic approach. Sedgwick's work challenged binary constructions of sexuality, emphasizing the importance of embracing fluidity and resisting fixed categories, while Butler's concept of gender performativity asserted that gender identities are socially constructed and continually performed rather than innate or predetermined (Henderson 4). Concisely, in queer theory, rigid categorization of individuals into binary categories like heterosexual/homosexual or male/female are challenged, and the limitations imposed by such categorizations dismantled. It challenges normativity by recognizing non-normative variations as legitimate aspects of human existence and, similar to critical race theory and feminist theory, by positing that marginalized perspectives can redefine societal norms (Henderson 5-6).

Subsequently, 'queering' develops into a critical practice, a way of seeing, experiencing, and knowing that encourages perspectives that go beyond normativity. Henderson puts it as follows:

> In a sense, what *queering* (as a gerund or verb) does is to challenge what might be considered the figureground proportions usually unchecked or uncritiqued. In this sense, *to queer* is to ask all of us to consider or reconsider what gets emphasized and how seeing from what are often marked as the 'margins' may make it possible to produce better, more inclusive knowledge. (6)

Within the scope of this chapter, both queering as a critical practice and queerness as an identity marker are central concepts. For one thing, *Moonlight*'s protagonist is queer, a gay Black man departing from normative expectations of heterosexuality.

Thus, various instances of queer intimacy in the movie will be examined. Here, however, queer intimacy will also be used to denote intimacy or affection that challenges the permitted heteronormativity within constructions of Black masculinity, but which is not necessarily sexual or erotic. This stems from the chapter's second aim: to employ queering as a critical practice that challenges ingrained assumptions and stereotypes surrounding Black masculinity. By "rescripting the accepted performances of heteronormative Black masculinity" (Neal 4), queering disrupts established norms and offers new perspectives. The argument put forth in this chapter asserts that *Moonlight*, through its exploration of queer intimacy and Black masculinity, effectively incorporates queering at their intersecting junctures.

Analysis of *Moonlight* (2016) through an Intersectional Magnifier

Moonlight chronicles the life of Chiron, a Black gay man, as he navigates the complexities of growing up and coming to terms with his identity. The tripartite movie portrays Chiron's life from childhood to adulthood as he goes through experiences of poverty, neglect, bullying, and abuse. In the first chapter, Chiron is still a young boy nicknamed 'Little' who is bullied by his peers and neglected by his drug-abusing mother Paula. Little's experience of bullying, social isolation, poverty, and neglect are reflected in his demeanor. He is portrayed as quiet, introverted, and withdrawn in nature. For instance, when Little plays soccer with a group of neighborhood boys, he is separated from the rest, is less involved in their scuffles, and stands more on the sidelines of the action (*Moonlight* 00:13:36). Once Little and his friend Kevin part with the group, Kevin urges Little to stand his ground against his bullies rather than 'being soft' and pushes him to test his self-assertion. Here, Little is explicitly confronted for the first time with expectations placed on him as a boy in his environment. When Kevin tells Little that "all [...] [he] gotta do is show these [...][n-word][11] [he] ain't soft" (*Moonlight* 00:15:16), he implies that Little's 'softness' is the reason for his bullying and exclusion. Even though softness is never clearly defined, Kevin suggests that its opposite includes self-assertiveness and the potential for aggression and violence. These traits are expected of Little. This moment reinforces the notion that vulnerability and a lack of aggression are seen as weaknesses within constructions of Black masculinity. Another telling indicator for this pressure is Chiron's nickname, "Little," because his small physique is already perceived as deficient enough to define him as a person.

Furthermore, his peers use derogatory terms like 'faggot' and other homophobic insults to offend and describe Little. Being as soft as Little is negatively and pejoratively associated with being gay as well as with not being masculine enough. Both

[11] In *Moonligh*, the n-word is often reclaimed as a self-empowering self-designation. However, as a White person unaffected by racism and its consequences, I refrain from using it and will censor the word in the following.

identity and character traits are excluded and even condemned by the other boys in Little's environment as illegitimate forms of Black masculinity. Here, *Moonlight* underscores the pressure Little faces to conform to hypermasculine ideals, highlighting the complex intersection of race and gender in the societal expectations that shape his experiences with his peers.

The scene also shows Little's early confrontation with an alternative understanding of masculinity – one that can indeed include tenderness and emotional vulnerability. Several close-up shots capture both the boys' facial expressions and their physical proximity as Chiron touches Kevin's face to examine his wound, worrying about his friend's pain (*Moonlight* 00:15:20). This act of tender touch between Little and Kevin challenges dominant notions of Black masculinity as inherently hardened and emotionally distant. At the same time, Little's gesture of care reveals his emerging negotiation of selfhood, as he begins to sense the dissonance between the emotional openness he instinctively exhibits and the physical markers of toughness expected by his peers. As Bost argues, when Little touches Kevin's bruised face, he begins to learn that Black masculinity is often performed as an exterior display of toughness (98). Kevin's dismissal of his own pain suggests that looking tough matters more than actually feeling tough. His response to Little rejecting the idea of being soft – "it don't mean nothing if they don't know it" (00:16:29) – underscores how masculinity relies on visible and physical proof, often expressed through fighting or play. Bost demonstrates that their subsequent wrestling in the scene highlights once more how Black masculinity is often shaped through physical encounters meant to build toughness (98). At the same time, Little's care and tenderness towards Kevin challenge this focus on hardness. Outside the context of sexual intimacy, the scene presents affection as a valid form of closeness between boys, quietly pushing back against societal expectations. By contrasting Little's sensitivity with Kevin's performance of toughness, *Moonlight* reveals the narrow boundaries of Black masculinity while suggesting that these limits can be softened through moments of tenderness.

Further moments of subversion occur in *Moonlight* when Chiron meets Juan. A neighboorhood drug dealer, Juan assumes the role of the only paternal figure in Chiron's life, playing a crucial part in his upbringing. As a compassionate mentor, Juan offers guidance and support to Chiron, whose life is marked by neglect and bullying. Furthermore, Juan provides Chiron with a safe space to explore his identity and navigate the complexities of his experiences. This pivotal relationship deepens when Juan takes Chiron to the beach and teaches him how to swim. Upon arriving, Chiron initially appears reserved, observant, and cautious (*Moonlight* 00:17:26), suggesting he is unaccustomed to paternal care and attention. When he finally enters the water, he hesitates at first, taking time to adjust to the unfamiliar environment of the ocean. Shortly after, a medium shot captures Juan cradling Chiron on the surface of the water, emphasizing the physical connection between them (00:18:15).

This framing highlights Juan's nurturing and protective role, amplifying the emotional impact of the scene. Chiron's trust in Juan symbolizes the vulnerability he is willing to show in his presence. At this moment of uncertainty, Chiron relies on Juan for safety and reassurance. Juan responds with love and patience, encouraging his trust when he says: "Give me your head. Here, let your head rest in my hand. Relax. I got you, I promise. I'm not gon' let you go" (00:18:05).

Following the swimming lesson, their conversation further solidifies Juan's role as a caregiving paternal figure. Juan shares insights about Black identity, his upbringing, and the importance of Chiron's independent choice in shaping his identity. He not only reassures Chiron of his place in the world by telling him: "There are Black people everywhere. Remember that, okay? No place you can go in the world ain't got no Black people" (00:19:35). Juan also empowers Chiron to define his own identity, adding, "At some point, you gotta decide for yourself who you gon' be. Can't let nobody make that decision for you" (00:21:00). Juan's words encourage Chiron to embrace individuality and challenge societal expectations. Furthermore, he creates a nurturing space where Chiron can explore his emotions, vulnerabilities, and fears. Later, this intimacy resurfaces when Juan shares a childhood story, ultimately concluding on the topic of Black identity and individuality. Another shot-reverse-shot sequence underscores their physical as well as emotional closeness and familiarity (00:20:32-20:53). Throughout the first chapter, Juan's support helps Chiron begin to form a sense of self. The boy finds solace in Juan's acceptance and understanding, which validate his individuality. Juan's overt and unquestioned displays of affection and tenderness disrupt conventional boundaries imposed on expressions of Black masculinity.

While the first part of *Moonlight* primarily presents moments of queer emotional and physical non-sexual intimacy, the second part contrasts hypersexualized notions of Black male intimacy with depictions of queer sexual intimacy among Black men. Early on, Chiron is confronted with expectations of Black male sexuality that differ from his own behavior and identity. As Chiron grapples with bullying at school and physical abuse by his mother at home, he notices his peers focusing on sexual conquests. In one scene, for instance, Kevin tells Chiron that he ended up in detention after being caught having sex with a girl in the stairway. Kevin explains:

> Look I just wanted some quick head, you know, but this chick all like "Hit that shit, Kevin. Hit it with that big dick." Like what she got to compliment a [n-word] for? So I'm like: "A'ight. Shit. We can do this you know, you know? So I started banging her back out, dawg. I'm talking I'm banging her back out. She went and made all this fucking noise though. So Aimes come in, acted all five-O and shit, almost had my ass suspended, dawg" (00:38:06-38:26)

Kevin's account reflects the notion that Black men are expected to be sexually assertive and dominant, to figuratively 'have a big dick,' as indicated by the girl's

statement. The emphasis put on physical attributes and sexual prowess in Kevin's statement reinforces the hypersexualized image associated with Black men. Additionally, Kevin's casual and explicit language – including phrases like "banging her back out" – aligns with the stereotype of aggressive sexual encounters. It underscores the perception that Black masculinity is defined by an aggressive and non-sensual pursuit of sexual relationships with women (borne in mind, not with men).

This pervasive image of dominant and hypersexual Black masculinity continues to resurface in subsequent scenes of *Moonlight*, further underscoring the societal expectations placed upon Black male sexuality. In one instance, Chiron dreams of Kevin engaging in sexual activity with a girl in his garden. This encounter again reinforces the stereotype of Black men as sexually assertive and physically dominant (00:43:03). This dream sequence mirrors the prevalent hypersexualized narrative of Black masculinity that Chiron is confronted with in his environment. Furthermore, in another scene, when Chiron is assaulted by his bullies, the teenagers attempt to shame him by referencing his mother's involvement in sex work, a means she employs to support her substance abuse disorder. One bully crudely remarks: "Or does she [talking about Teresa, Juan's girlfriend] charge like Paula [Chiron's mother]? Hell, Paula getting cheap though. Talkin' like a rock can get your rocks sucked!" (00:47:15). This statement reduces Chiron's mother to a mere object of purchase, portraying her as having little value. Sex is further depicted as a transactional process focused solely on satisfying men's desires for as little cost as possible. This reinforces the harmful notion that Black women, like Paula or Teresa, are available for sexual acts with little regard for their autonomy or dignity. This statement reflects the broader culture of sexual objectification, as well as the devaluation of women's agency and well-being that accompanies the hypersexualized expectations of Black men. Additionally, the remark perpetuates the notion that sexual encounters – even exploitative ones – are both expected and celebrated for Black men. Moreover, in the same statement and scene, Chiron's bullies also imply that Chiron has a sexual relationship with Teresa, the only nurturing figure in his life after Juan's death. The insinuation highlights how fantasies of sexual conquests among Black men are portrayed as so pervasive that they even extend to familial or caregiving relationships. And it underscores the immense pressure on Chiron to conform to (hetero)sexual expectations.

However, *Moonlight* contrasts the hypersexualized portrayal of Black male sexuality with an exploration of alternative expressions in later scenes. In an exemplary scene, after being kicked out by his neglectful mother, Chiron seeks shelter outdoors and ends up at the beach (*Moonlight* 00:49:34). By chance, Kevin meets him there and the two have an intimate conversation during which they open up to each other and let their guard down. Their conversation reveals the complexities of expressing affection between men within the confines of Black masculinity. At first, Chiron

questions Kevin about giving him the nickname 'Black.' He asks: "Why you always calling me that? [...] what kind of dude goes around giving other dudes nicknames?" (00:50:14-28). This highlights his discomfort with acknowledging or embracing affection between Black men. Chiron's reluctance reflects the prevailing social expectation that Black men should remain emotionally detached for fear of being perceived as homosexual or deviating from conventional ideals of heterosexual dominance. Kevin, however, responds with confidence, showing an understanding of male affection that defies these restrictions. Eventually, his desire for emotional release and respite from daily hardships resonates with Chiron in their conversation:

> Sometimes round the way, where we live [*pauses*] you can catch that same breeze [of the ocean]. It just come through the hood and it's like everything stop for a second [*pauses*] 'cause everyone just wanna feel it. Everything just gets quiet, you know? – And it's like all you can hear is your own heartbeat. Right? – Yeah. Feels so good, man. – So good [*pauses*] – Hell, shit make you wanna cry, feel so good. – You cry? – Nah, but makes me want to. What you cry about? – Shit, I cry so much sometimes I feel like I'm gon' just turn into drops. (00:52:10-00:53:10)

In this moment, their openness about emotions and vulnerabilities defies the emotional stoicism expected from Black men, challenging the notion that expressing grief or tenderness signals weakness or contradicts masculine behavior. The poignant reference to tears flowing into the ocean deepens the scene's thematic exploration, symbolizing fluidity, softness, and emotional release. This imagery counterbalances societal expectations of hardness and stoicism ingrained in stereotypical notions of Black masculinity. At this point, the scene's emotionality and intimacy segues into sexuality, as Kevin and Chiron now also get physically closer. As the scene shifts to sexual intimacy, the camera lingers on close-ups –Chiron's head resting on Kevin's shoulder and Kevin's arm wrapped around him. Finally, as they kiss and Kevin masturbates Chiron, an extreme close-up captures Chiron's hand grasping the sand (00:54:45-55:30). This scene of sensual and sexual intimacy between the teenagers creates space for queer desire within Black male sexuality. And yet, *Moonlight* also addresses the harsh reality of queer Black men in Chiron's life. After all, Kevin violently beats up Chiron under the pressure of his peer group on their next day at school. And Chiron seeks brutal vengeance against his bullies ending up in juvenile detention.

The movie then moves fast forward ten years in Chiron's life. After his time in juvenile detention, Chiron has emerged as a hardened drug dealer. He has a strong physique, gold fronts, and a respected, or even feared, standing in society (01:09:05). Even now, the film shows Chiron outwardly conforming to aspects of Black hypermasculinity, but this does not simplify the question of his identity in the third part of the movie. Instead, *Moonlight* focuses on Chiron's internal struggle. He struggles to come to terms with his past, his personal relationships, and the societal expectations imposed on him as a Black man. Later, he reconciles with his formerly abusive

mother during her time in rehabilitation and rekindles his bond with Kevin. In the final part, the movie highlights the complexity of identity formation. It shows that identity is not confined to surface-level appearances or societal constructs of masculinity. Chiron's exploration of authenticity and his pursuit of meaningful connections challenge the idea that identity can be neatly categorized or defined.

The third part of *Moonlight* offers a nuanced exploration of Chiron's identity, beginning with a haunting nightmare that brings to light an abusive episode from his childhood (01:06:10). This nightmare not only reveals the lingering effects of his past trauma, but also challenges Chiron's outwardly hardened persona. While he initially appears to conform to societal expectations of Black hypermasculinity, the film consistently uncovers glimpses of his emotional vulnerability beneath this façade. His tough exterior seems to be a coping mechanism, an attempt to assert power and control in a world that prizes Black male dominance and toughness over vulnerability. Through Chiron's development, the film ultimately illustrates how, constrained by systemic racism and limited social and economic opportunities, Black men may feel compelled to resort to illegal activities as a means of survival and self-preservation.

Chiron's struggle is further explored in a scene where he reunites with Kevin. Chiron visits Kevin at the diner where he works as a chef. The unfolding scene reveals their ongoing familiarity and connection. It begins with Chiron grooming himself, meticulously combing his hair, and adjusting his outfit in the window of his car (01:22:18). This moment serves as a visual prelude that signifies Chiron's anticipation and appreciation of their reunion. Kevin's joyful reaction to seeing Chiron at the bar establishes their ongoing bond, as he says: "Man, what are you doin' down here. Hey, hey, you here now, man. That's all that matters. There you go with that dam noddin' again, man, you ain't, you ain't changed one damn bit. You still can't say more than three words at a time, huh?" (01:25:04).

Kevin's remark about Chiron's nodding and silence shows his deep understanding of Chiron's character and his affection for him. During an intimate conversation over drinks both men open up about their lives. Close-ups of their faces in shot-reverse-shot sequences suggest the emotional depth of their conversation (01:24:36-01:24:42). Eventually, Kevin reveals that he became a father unexpectedly. He vulnerably shares his private matters with Chiron saying: "We had him young. Shit, too young. Man, when I got locked up. Man, that shit was hard, wasn't no way I could go back to the streets, man. Not after this" (01:30:19). Kevin then prepares his signature dish for Chiron. Here, the audience gets a sense of the effort and the attention to detail that he puts into the dish by means of a series of close-up shots of Kevin's hands during each step of the preparation of his Pollo alla Plancha for Chiron (01:26:18-01:27:03). While eating, Chiron, initially reluctant, eventually admits his involvement in the drug trade, whereupon Kevin's affection repeatedly shines

through when he criticizes Chiron stating: "That ain't you, Chiron" (01:32:05). At this point, Kevin's remark suggests that he sees Chiron's true character beneath the tough façade of a drug dealer and wants him to reconcile with his identity. Though Chiron initially reacts defensively, he eventually asks why Kevin reached out after all these years. Struggling to express his emotions, Kevin plays Chiron the song "Hello Stranger" by Barbara Lewis, which first prompted him to reach out. The song's themes of grief and hope from a past lover's visit echo their own past relationship. The men's encounter in the diner thus fosters vulnerability, emotional connection, and the potential for growth and self-discovery. Moreover, it emphasizes their quest for authentic relationships with other men. Ultimately, Kevin offers Chiron a place to stay and thus demonstrates to Chiron that he is willing to be a refuge and support system for his journey toward self-acceptance.

The closing scene of *Moonlight* further explores Kevin's and Chiron's struggle for self-acceptance as Black men growing up. After Chiron accepts Kevin's invitation, they discuss their struggle with societal expectations and the pressure to conform in Kevin's kitchen. Kevin reflects on the past pressure he experienced to conform to societal expectations about his identity. Kevin describes how he never felt he was worth much, always doing what others expected rather than pursuing his own desires (01:43:18). As Kevin shares his life story and path to self-acceptance, *Moonlight* acknowledges the challenges imposed by harmful expectations of Black masculinity. It also highlights the opportunities for exploring alternative expressions of Black identity. By renouncing his criminal past and emphasizing his personal growth, Kevin embraces an alternative form of Black masculinity that rejects stereotypes and fosters authenticity. In turn, a deep layer of vulnerability emerges also for Chiron, when he confesses to Kevin: "You're the only man that's ever touched me. You're the only one. I haven't touched anyone since" (01:44:34). This revelation points to Chiron's loss of intimacy and emotional connection, resulting from his experiences of hardening to the world. After his confession, Chiron and Kevin share a profoundly intimate moment. Both are shown naked, with Chiron resting his head on Kevin's shoulder in the privacy of his bedroom. This last part of the movie ultimately leaves space for alternative explorations of Black masculinity and a nuanced portrayal of the complexities of Black male identity formation. By depicting the intimate, affectionate, and vulnerable relationship between Chiron and Kevin, the film opens up possibilities for queer expressions of Black masculinity. Queer, not only regarding their sexuality but also concerning the possibility of emotionality, tenderness, and affection between men outside of sexual contexts.

Conclusion

As delineated in the previous analysis of *Moonlight*, the movie consistently presents, challenges, and confronts harmful constructions of Black masculinity, while concurrently illuminating alternatives. Notably, within scenes that depict intimate relationships between Chiron and other men, distinct spaces emerge wherein the characters find the liberty to express emotions, embrace vulnerability, and exhibit affectionate and nurturing behavior. These *inter-male* moments of closeness are interpreted in this chapter as a way of queering in the movie. Queering, on the one hand, because same-sex affection has no legitimacy in typical constructions of Black masculinity or is even dismissed. In particular, the relationship between Chiron and Juan demonstrates the way in which intimacy, vulnerability, and emotional depth can exist as part of Black male relationships and identity formation. But also central to this reading is the notion of queering in relation to queer Black male sexual identity, as *Moonlight* affirms same-sex attraction and intimacy between Chiron and Kevin as valid expressions of Black male sexuality.

This chapter's theoretical framework has laid the groundwork for applying queering as a form of critical social practice to *Moonlight*. Queering, here, has been used to challenge the entrenched stereotypes of Black masculinity. Drawing on critical race and queer theories, this analysis positions moments of Black intimacy in the film – both emotional and non-erotic – as acts of resistance against hegemonic masculinity. Characters like Juan, Chiron, and Kevin repeatedly defy the societal pressures placed on Black men, particularly the rigid expectations of hypermasculinity. By centering queer intimacy between these characters, *Moonlight* disrupts heteronormative, hypermasculine, and hypersexual expectations imposed on Black men.

In line with an intersectional approach to media studies, this analysis has demonstrated how *Moonlight* challenges existing power structures through its expansive portrayal of a Black male coming-of-age story. The film offers a blueprint for an 'enqueery' of normative expectations surrounding race, gender, and sexuality. By centering Chiron – as a child, teenager, and young man – navigating restrictive societal norms, the film invites audiences to reconsider traditional portrayals of Black manhood. In *Moonlight*, queerness, in its various dimensions, converges with the complexities of Black masculinity to create space for renegotiation and transformation. At these intersections, the burdensome expectations placed upon Black men – embodied by Chiron, Kevin, and Juan – momentarily recede, opening pathways to liberation. Ultimately, *Moonlight* not only resists harmful stereotypes of Black masculinity but also envisions more expansive, inclusive, and authentic possibilities for Black identities on screen.

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